

Notes

THE FICTION OF BLINDNESS AND REAL LIFE: THE DIARY PORTION OF HENRY GREEN'S *BLINDNESS* (1926)

HENRY GREEN's first novel, *Blindness*, was published in 1926, when the young author was twenty-one years old. Unlike Green's later novels, which tend to eschew formal chapters and artificial divisions, it is split into three parts, the first of which is the diary of the protagonist, schoolboy John Haye. Most critics have read the diary section as establishing the artistic inclinations of the 'budding' author, and thus making Green's novel a *Künstlerroman*.¹ Yet critics have not examined the composition of this diary section and its relationship to Green's own life, perhaps because the starting critical assumption regarding Green's fiction is that it is detached and uninterested in social reality.² Yet in his memoir *Pack my bag* (1940), Green writes, 'I had begun to keep a diary part of which has survived...' ³ To speak of 'part' of a diary as having 'survived' when there is no physical copy of the diary extant suggests that the diary has survived in a different form, and this article argues that Green's diary 'survived' by being transcribed in *Blindness*, which Green started while at Eton and finished in his first year at Oxford. What is curious about the diary in *Blindness* is how accurately such banal details like the weather and public events correspond to reality, which makes it clear that Green was using a template, such as his own diary, when composing *Blindness*. In other words, by looking at the diary in

Blindness closely and comparing it to published reports in *The Times* and *Eton College Chronicle*, one can parse out what was invented and what Green fictionalized, giving us a closer insight into the working of the young novelist, what of the world around him was suitable for fiction, and what needed to be fictionalized. The topic also addresses whether the diary section of *Blindness* can be considered a historical document for the Eton Arts Society, as early reviewers suggested.⁴

The diary section in *Blindness* spans a fictional time of eighteen months, from July 1922 to October 1923 (although the section formally ends with a letter dated April 1924 announcing John Haye's blinding in a railway accident). John Haye is a schoolboy at Noat, a homonym of Eton read backwards. The first entry, '6 July (about)', is about a visit the previous day to Henley, and in 1922 the opening day for Henley was Wednesday, 5 July, and on that first day Eton raced, losing to Christ Church.⁵ When John Haye goes to military camp in August 1922 (p. 348), he writes, 'It has been raining viciously as if with a purpose.' The day the Eton contingent arrived at Tidworth that year, two and a half inches of rain fell, a record at the time.⁶ 15 November 1922 is polling day, and the victory of Bonar Law, while not explicitly named, is possible to construe from the text. House football, which is played at the end of Michaelmas term in 1922, is mentioned with anguish; in reality, Henry Green won a House cap that term.⁷

⁴ Robert Byron's review of *Blindness*, signed B.G., in the Oxford magazine *Cherwell* was titled, 'Henry Yorke and the Eton Society of Arts'. When Brian Howard read it, he wrote to Brian Guinness: 'I suppose you've seen Henry Yorke's book? I think it's rather good, and the Eton part about us all is amusing.' See Marie-Jacqueline Lancaster (ed.), *Brian Howard: Portrait of a Failure* (London, 1968), 119, 172. On the Eton Arts Society, see Martin Green, *Children of the Sun: A Narrative of 'Decadence' in England after 1918* (New York, 1976).

⁵ 'Eton... lacked the stamina and experience of the fine eight which won the event last year.' *The Times*, 6 July 1922, p. 18. The *Eton College Chronicle* reported: 'A wet Henley and a crew defeated in the first race do not provide a very engaging subject for an article' (13 July 1922, p. 265). All citations from *Blindness* are cited internally and come from *Blindness*, in *Nothing Doting Blindness* (Harmondsworth, 1993 [1926]), 339–504.

⁶ *The Times*, 9 Aug. 1922, p. 14.

⁷ *Eton College Chronicle*, 20 Dec. 1922, p. 348.

¹ For a review of the existing criticism, see Pascale Aebischer, 'Creative Disability/Disabled Creativity in Henry Green's *Blindness* (1926)', *Studies in the Novel*, xxxv (Winter 2003), 510–23.

² See Barbara H. Brothers, 'Henry Green: Time and the Absurd', *boundary 2*, v (1977), 863–76, at p. 864; Michael Gorra, *The English Novel at Mid-Century: From the Leaning Tower* (New York, 1990), 23; Edward Stokes, *The Novels of Henry Green* (London, 1959), 17; A. Kingsley Weatherhead, *A Reading of Henry Green* (Seattle, 1961), 4; Andrew Gibson, *Reading Narrative Discourse: Studies in the Novel from Cervantes to Beckett* (New York, 1990), 121.

³ Henry Green, *Pack My Bag* (New York, 2004 [1940]), 108.

Sixth Form Eton boys who attended OTC (Officer Training Corps) camp were due back on 25 January 1923, the same day John Haye arrives back at Noat (p. 358). Writing from Venice, B.G. asks about the Boat Race and Junior School Quarter Mile—he is referring to the Cambridge–Oxford Boat Race at Putney, which in late March 1923 had its 75th running,⁸ and Eton College Sports day, which took place in late March.⁹ When the entry of 4 May (1923) complains of the heat—‘It is so hot as to make writing impossible as my pen and style testify’—that day in reality set a record for early May, with temperatures of over 80 degrees in the shade.¹⁰ Just as Henry Yorke published his first story in *College Days*, a magazine created by Alan Clutton-Brock in response to the *Eton Candle* run by Harold Acton and Brian Howard, in *Blindness* John Haye’s work is published in *Noat Days*, a magazine set up to compete with *Noat Lights*, run by his friends Seymour and B.G.¹¹ The marionette plays mentioned in the diary correspond to the ‘puppet plays’ the Eton Arts Society staged.¹² The ‘Noat Art Society Summer Exhibition’ in the entry of 2 June (1923), with its portraits of members, is the same as the Eton Arts Society exhibition that summer.¹³

For all this accuracy, there are a few inconsistencies in the diary. The entry for ‘Good Friday’ follows the entry for 1 April, but in

1923 Good Friday was 30 March and 1 April was Easter Sunday. It is unclear if this was intentional (a religious lapse?) or a printer’s error which persisted through the multiple editions of *Blindness* (there are no drafts of *Blindness* extant). There are two further mistakes in the chronology, although both are relatively minor: the entry for 19 March (p. 361), notes that ‘the day after the day after tomorrow’ will be Saturday, but in 1923, 19 March was a Monday, so the date in question would be Thursday. Finally, the letter from B.G. to Seymour, which announces John Haye’s blindness, is dated Saturday 7 April. The chronology of the diary makes us assume that the year should be 1924, but 7 April was a Saturday in 1923, not 1924.

Green did not just transcribe from his diary but selected from it and worked over the material, which leads to the question of what the diary section in *Blindness* omits from its presumed template. A change in Henry Green’s master, in Michaelmas term 1922, is not mentioned; in general, the school staff are relatively limited in the fictionalized diary in comparison to the other schoolboys.¹⁴ The entry of 4 April (1923) mentions only the marionette play the Arts Society put on and what a great success it was, while on that date the King and Queen (in ‘a dress of blue and silver brocade, with a diamond necklace’) came to Eton to hear a recital of Mendelssohn’s ‘Elijah’.¹⁵ While royal visits were events, they were not uncommon; the King could informally start a speech at Eton, ‘I come from Westminster Abbey to speak a few words to you...’¹⁶ There is no entry between 24 February and 10 March (1923), but in Green’s life this time was marked by his parents’ railway accident in Mexico—they were initially reported in national newspapers as dead. For obvious narrative reasons, the need for the railway accident in *Blindness* makes it impossible to have another railway accident in the text; but it does lead to a lacuna in what Green later called ‘shame remembered’ at his

⁸ *The Times*, 26 Mar. 1923, p. 7.

⁹ *The Times*, 24 Mar. 1923, p. 5.

¹⁰ *The Times*, 5 May 1923, p. 12.

¹¹ See Humphrey Carpenter, *The Brideshead Generation: Evelyn Waugh and His Friends* (Boston, 1990 [1989]).

¹² Green, *Pack My Bag*, p. 168. At about this time, April 1923, a marionette opera from Rome arrived to enthusiastic crowds in London’s Scala Theatre. A *Times* editorial notes that ‘the wooden actors... have touched the imagination of London.... Players who are not persons at all must come as a relief to those theatre-goers for whom our stage is oppressed by the dominance of personality’ (*The Times*, 18 Apr. 1923, p. 13). The troupe performed at high-class parties. Lord Roseberry, former Etonian and a relation to Green’s wife, Maud Evelyn Wyndham (she was a great-niece), had a marionette performance in the billiards room of his Epsom residence on his 77th birthday (*The Times*, 8 May 1924, p. 14).

¹³ ‘On the whole the Eton Society of Arts seems to have been more absorbed in the faces of its members than in anything else, and one can only hope that those who see the exhibition will be equally interested’, *Eton College Chronicle*, 4 June 1923, p. 443.

¹⁴ In Part One there are 28 school fellows mentioned by name as opposed to three members of staff.

¹⁵ *The Times*, 5 Apr. 1923, p. 8. A week later they walked from Windsor Castle to Eton to take a tour of several buildings; they were escorted by the reverend of Eton and the School Clerk (*The Times*, 10 Apr. 1923, p. 18).

¹⁶ *Eton College Chronicle*, 6 Jan. 1922, p. 148.

actions when told about his parents' probable death: he did not feel any grief and actually told his headmaster 'I don't know how I shall feel about this later but I don't feel too bad now', which he notes 'was the first time I had ever said anything genuine to him and I was so ashamed after that I took good care it should be the last.'¹⁷ In *Blindness*, the entry after what would have been the railway accident comments upon the naturalness of emotions: 'Sometimes I think it is better to be just what one is . . .' (p. 360).

One of the most interesting changes involves John Haye's birthday, which is on 31 October (Green was born on 29 October 1905). On 31 October (1922) the diary announces, 'I am seventeen now—quite aged' (p. 354). A year later there is no birthday entry, which would have been for 18, not yet the age of majority but the end of adolescence. With the First World War looming over the novel, from the military camp the boys attend to the realization John has that many of the servants at his home had either been wounded during the war or had relations who were killed, this is also the age when a boy could join the army. For some reason the novel does not want to force upon us his 18th birthday; the diary is cut off on 20 October (1923), with a closing salvo about *Crime and Punishment*, 'What a force books are! This is like dynamite' (p. 364). When one considers that the initial title of *Blindness* was *Youth and Age*, a title whose dominant motif is maturity, an imprecision on the passage of time shows a kind of flippancy on the part of the main character, to say nothing of the forced effacement of the birthday marking one's adulthood.

Most of this remains on the level of speculation given the fact that neither Green's physical diary nor earlier drafts of *Blindness* exist to verify my claims. Nonetheless, the sustained level of accuracy in the diary section of *Blindness* makes it impossible to imagine its composition without recourse to a contemporaneous account. The diary section had, in a way, written itself, which leads us to question whether it is an integral part of the novel. In some way, its aesthetic failure is due to the fact that Green did not sufficiently fictionalize it. It

reads too much like an actual diary and not like the diary portion of a novel. I would like to argue that Green began his novel with John Haye already blind, and that the inclusion of Part One came afterwards.

The first chapter in Part Two—'News'—reads like the start of a novel. Its first pages have a literary polish rarely reached elsewhere in the novel. They have a kind of care and obsession that first pages, and first pages in first novels by young writers, often have. But they are not mannered; if anything, they are perhaps the best pages in the book. The first paragraph is, suitably, an opening statement of intent and daring: four of its six sentences are verbless. When there are verbs, the tense changes or is indeterminate: 'Outside it was raining, and through the leaded window panes a grey light came in and was lost in the room.' Is this in the past or the present? When Emily Haye—mentioned by her first name only once by the narrator¹⁸—'came in,' she 'was red, red,' but when the narrative fixes on the characters, it is with the present tense: 'He turns his head on the pillow, the nurse rises, and Mrs Haye walks firmly up to the room' (pp. 367–8). This kind of verbal daring is characteristic of Green's later work, but *Blindness* is often seen as a stalled effort: yet if it started with Part Two, would that judgement still hold?

The strongest evidence for this is the formal inclusion of the traditional elements of exposition in the first chapter of Part Two. There is information about John Haye's family: his father and mother are dead. The first chapter of Part Two also introduces the three major themes of the book: John's blinding and how he will cope with the loss of sight (the flat theme), John's ambitions to write (a meta-theme), and John's relationship to his family (the deep theme). His step-mother tells him, 'you're not a bit like the family' (p. 372), and she goes on, 'You know God gave you your sight and He has taken it away, but He has left us each other, you know . . .' (p. 372). The words are Job's, who after rising, then

¹⁸ Her first name will not appear again until her friend Mabel Palmer calls her by it late in Part Three, and then once again in London. The narrator calling her Emily Haye is as close as Green gets to an *Emma*-like exposition.

¹⁷ Green, *Pack My Bag*, pp. 149, 142.

falling again to ground, says, 'Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord' (Job 1:21). She has appropriated the words of Job, for in some ways John's judgement is everything in her precarious position as step-mother who has raised her step-child with the love given to a biological son. But it is not out of her womb that John came. And if anyone can appropriate Job's words, it is John, who has been punished for a crime he did not commit. John realizes, like Job, that 'silence would be so terrible', but he cannot understand how to mediate his feelings towards his step-mother—'it was she who had brought him up'—when this other figure, his biological mother, still exists in his thoughts, even if she had done nothing but 'bring him into the world'—because, after all, Job's submission to God is based on this, God's power over everything, but most critically his power to bring living beings into the world (p. 372).

But if this is the natural start of the novel, why did Green insert the diary as Part One? Part of it was no doubt that the early schema of the novel, begun while he was at Eton, involved the public school boy, a popular character in fiction at the time given the success of Alec Waugh's *Loom of Youth* (1917) and Shane Leslie's *The Oppidan* (1921).¹⁹ Having a public school boy as the main character without any of the public school scenes might have seemed, from a publishing perspective, unwise. But this probably did not coerce Green; he had a genuine interest in books like Waugh's, and of course he wanted to have his own say in the public school matter. But to do so with the traditional public school narrative would have defeated his purpose. For as much as the public school novel can be critical of the school, as *Loom of Youth* is, it is ultimately bound to have no higher character than the school itself. Green did not want that, yet the public school genre is very much premised on this point.

The diary section was also needed, Green might have felt, to round off the book. It would be too jagged, too disoriented, to start with the blinding. For the developmental schema, something of the anterior life is needed. He could have done this by having one of John's school friends coming to visit after the blinding or the headmaster writing to express concern. But if Green wanted a longer exposition of John before the blinding, then he certainly need a Part One. But that begs the question of why he chose a diary form, and not an expository narrative?

The answer might be simple enough. The diary already existed. Who at the age of eighteen or nineteen would go to the trouble of writing a section from scratch if already existing words could be cobbled together instead? If he needed further justification, Green could have thought that the formal qualities of the diary were attractive to the broader outlines of the book. It is a novel about a boy wanting to be a writer, and there he is in Part One, writing his own words—yet what is wrong with those words, why are they not sufficiently writerly? If he is going to be physically blinded, why not add a diary section which also, paradoxically, makes him blind as well? For a young writer whose autobiographical first work involves the elimination of his biological family, the blinding of his eyes, and the scarring of his face, this is a minor admission. Reading *Blindness* with these caveats in mind, one can better understand the aesthetic difficulty posed by the diary section. As I have argued, the diary section was not the natural *incipit* of the novel, which more properly belongs to the first chapter of Part Two, but rather a later addition Green made to fit the novel into expectations concerning the public schoolboy genre.

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¹⁹ The Old Etonian Leslie was invited by the Political Society to speak at Eton in November 1922. In *Blindness* the visit of the 'biggest swell I wrote to', an author of 'thousands of books', is planned for 14 November (p. 353).